

Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: *Periya Mēḷam* and Its Performance Practice

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The whole place, too, was filled with the horrid din of tomtoms, and the shrill noise of pipes, reverberating through the weird gloom of the passages, and giving one quite an uncanny feeling. (Mitchell 1885, 140–1)

The sounds produced by these instruments are far from pleasing, and may even appear hideous to European ears. (Dubois 1906/1986, 587)

During the festival nights of Ani Tirumanjanam and Arudra Darsanam, I have lingered for hours at a stretch at the corners of the main car streets, in the thrall of Nadasvaram music of Chidambaram Vaidyanathan of revered memory . . . Ever since my boyhood, when I heard it first, nothing has stirred me to the depths of my being as much as Chidambaram Vaidyanathan's Mallari in the raga, Nattai—played traditionally when Nataraja and Sivakama are taken out in procession during the festivals. (Natarajan 1974, 137)

The unfamiliar music flowing inside and around the Hindu temples has caught the attention of many inquisitive European travelers to South India for centuries. Their reactions to these sounds were mixed with bewilderment and uneasiness at best, and usually characterized by impulsive criticism and naive ethnocentrism. Mrs. Murray Mitchell, the wife of an English missionary, gives a typical example of European reaction when she describes the music she heard in 1882 at the famous Minakshi Temple in Madurai as shown in the first quotation. For Mitchell, the music, sounded as “horrid din” and “shrill noise,” was incomprehensible and threatening. The author of the second quotation, Abbe Dubois, is a French Roman Catholic priest and the celebrated author of the *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*. Although having lived in South India for more than 3 decades and extremely conversant with the native customs and lore, he was still not free from the European-centered sensibility toward music.¹ The music which Mitchell and Dubois heard was in all probability that of the *periya mēḷam* ensemble, featuring the *nāgasvaram* (or *nādasvaram*, double-reed aerophone) and *tavil* (double-headed drum).

The reaction to the same music by a South Indian Hindu, as appeared in the third quotation, presents a sharp contrast to the European characterization of

the music as weird and dreadful. For him and millions of other Hindus in South India, the sound of the *periya mēlam* possesses auspiciousness (*maṅgalam*) and majesty (*gambīram*). *Periya mēlam* music is often believed to be the sonic manifestation of the deity, and it makes the deity's presence immediate and real to worshippers. For this reason, *periya mēlam* is considered an essential element of temple rituals and festivals, as indicated in a statement commonly made by *periya mēlam* musicians: "There is no village without a temple, and there is no temple without the *nāgasvaram*." (cf. Krishna Iyer 1933, 71).

While the significance of *periya mēlam* music in the history of South Indian culture is widely recognized, its history and past performance practices remain to be little known outside South India. In this essay, I will provide a brief account of the history and performance practice of *periya mēlam* music (as part of the temple rituals and festivals) by surveying existing literature and information gathered from my fieldwork.²

Historical Evidence

The origin and development of *periya mēlam* music is traced by musicians and patrons alike to temple rituals and festivals. However, it is difficult either to support their assertion with concrete evidence or to determine the historical depth of this tradition if in fact that was the case, due to the paucity of the historical evidence pointing to the existence of *nāgasvaram*. Given the current knowledge of this issue, it is important to survey presently available evidence, and to suggest the orientation of future research.

A group of South Indian scholars maintain that it was during the time of the Vijayanagar empire (14th to 17th centuries) when the tradition of *periya mēlam* began, on the grounds that available historical evidence is dated only after the time of Vijayanagar (Raghavan 1949, 1955; Isaac 1964; Sambamurthy 1983). The term *nāgasvaram* and its cognates began to appear in literary works from the early 15th century. *Nāgasura* or *nāgasara* is the far more common term applied to the instrument than *nāgasvaram* in the written documents from this period, while the accompanying drum is referred to as *dolu*, *dola*, or *dol* instead of *tavil*, indicating the connection to North Indian drums with similar names.³ A Telugu work, *Kridabhīrama* (c. 1400), is probably the first historical evidence that includes a reference to the instrument, and it is stated under the term *nāgasara* (Raghavan 1949, 156).

Several inscriptions speak of gifts of land or of a village made to the temple to appoint or support *nāgasvaram* and *tavil* musicians. Although Raghavan states that *nāgasvaram* was well-known in the 15th century (1949, 159), the earliest inscription referring to these instruments is dated in 1496 and is found in Tirumala (Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh). This inscription in Tamil records

that an equal amount of money (2 *paṇam*) was to be paid to the *naṭṭuvar* (dance master) and *muttukkārar* (timekeeper), *emperumāṇaḍiyār* (temple dancers), and the players of *dola* and *nāgasara* (Vijayaraghavacharya 1933, 318–24). Another Tamil inscription found inside the Govindarajasvami Temple in Tirupati records the employment of two *nāgasvaram* (*nāgasuram*) musicians with the contractual terms of remuneration (36 *rekhai-pon* per year) (Vijayaraghavacharya 1937, 396–406). An inscription, dated 1549 and found at the Nilakantha Temple in the village of Nitturu (Anantapur district, Andhra Pradesh), reports a gift of lands donated to the temple for the maintenance of service by six dancing girls, Bhavagata chanters and *nāgasara* musicians (as cited in Raghavan 1949, 157). A Kannada inscription (dated 1552) at the ruined Vasanta-Mallikarjuna Temple in Devalapura (Bellary district, Karnataka) records the appointment of a *nāgasvaram* musician (*nāgasvaravanu*) by the name of Musiya-Ravuta at the temple (Shama Shastry 1986, 9:643).

It is likely that the *nāgasvaram* music was played in wide areas in Vijayanagar territory, considering the scattered locations where these inscriptions are found. Moreover, it was played not only at Hindu temples, but also at Jain temples as indicated by an example of inscriptional evidence dated 1582 from Sirramur (South Arcot district) (Hultzschi 1982, 1:42–3),⁴ and by miniature paintings at the Jain monastery in Shravana Belugala (Hassan district, Karnataka) which portray “nagasvaram musicians in procession” (Kuppuswamy and Hariharan 1985, 50).

Since inscriptions were incised mainly to keep official records of grants and donations, the information gleaned from them is often confined to the names of instruments current at the time and the general nature of its performing context. Foreign visitors to India often had access to ruling kings and their courts, and left us valuable data concerning their sociocultural life including accounts on music and dance. Although often tainted by ethnocentrism, the accounts by foreign visitors provide vivid observation of performance practice based on their own firsthand participation in the events, which complements the information from inscriptions.

Two Portuguese traders, Domingo Paes and Fernao Nuniz, visited Vijayanagar during the reign of Krishnadeva Raya (1509–1530), shortly before the above inscriptions were cut. While both travelers make a number of references to music and dance, Paes’ observations are particularly vivid. According to his account, for example, the king had in his court thousands of women who served as palanquin bearers, doorkeepers, dancing girls, warriors, wrestlers, and musicians including those who played “pipes” (Sewell 1900/1980, 249). Apart from these accounts on court life, Paes also mentioned that the dancing girls and women musicians accompanied the “triumphal cars which run on wheels” when it was

taken out for procession (262), and that during the annual 9-day festival, women performed on “trumpets, drums, viols, and pipes” (273).

Although Paes provided no further description of the pipes except to say that they were “not like ours” (Sewell 1900/1980, 273), he distinguished them from trumpets, and they may well have been some type of reed aerophones, especially when considering their use for *têr* processions, an important performing context for the contemporary *periya mēlam* ensemble.⁵ Unfortunately, Paes did not further describe the music played inside the temple in the manner of the detailed observation he made on other subjects.

About a century later, a noble Italian traveler, Sig. Pietro Della Valle (1586–1652), who visited the Vijayanagar territory between 1623 and 1625, left invaluable descriptions of the music in temples. When he visited a temple in Ikkeri (Shimoga district, Karnataka) in 1623, he wrote,

At day-break the Ministers of the Temple where we lodged, Sounded [sic] Pipes and Drums for a good while in the Temple, without other Ceremony. The like they did again about Noon, and at Evening. (Della Valle 1665, 119)

At another temple in Ikkeri, Della Valle described what he saw as,

The same Evening Lights being set up in all the Temples, and usual Musick of Drums and Pipes sounding, I saw in one Temple, which was none of the greatest, a Minister or Priest dance before the Idol all naked, saving that he had a small piece of Linnen over his Privities, as many of them continually go. (Della Valle 1665, 137)

From these, we learn that the use of an instrumental ensemble featuring wind instruments and drums to provide music in the temples was common, even at smaller temples. He described elsewhere the temple instrumental ensemble as producing “a great noise” (1665, 138), and the pipes in his description may well be a type of double-reed instrument akin to the *nāgasvaram*. Furthermore, the music was probably played periodically at the prescribed times of the day, reminiscent of the music played by the *periya mēlam* ensemble as part of the daily temple ritual discussed below. The dance before the deity to the musical accompaniment described above also reminds one of the practice of temple dancers (*dēvadāsīs*), though of a different sex, before the abolition of temple dancing.⁶

The sculptures and paintings offer important visual information on the morphology of musical instruments as well as on the performance practice and context. The South Indian temples prove to be an indispensable repository of the iconographic representations of music culture, with literally thousands of specimens containing a wealth of information (Tarlekar and Tarlekar 1972; Sambamurthy 1982b, 220–3; Kuppuswamy and Hariharan 1985).

As in the case of inscriptions, however, the visual representations of *periya mēlam* music are few in number. The dearth of such evidence presents a stark

contrast to the abundance of inscriptions of other aerophones such as flutes and trumpets (Isaac 1964). It also appears to contradict the commonly held belief among musicians and the general public that *periya mēlam* music has been an indispensable part of temple rituals since the inception of temples.

One difficulty in using iconographical representations for historical evidence centers around the determination of the date of a specimen. Unlike the inscriptions that often give the precise date of the document, iconographic representations are rarely dated. As most temples experienced a series of renovations at different points of history, to determine when each specimen was created remains difficult while the general stylistic features peculiar to each period can be useful.

Iconographic examples depicting *nāgasvaram*-type instruments from the Vijayanagar territory are found at the Narayanasvami Temple in Melkote (Mandya district, Karnataka) (Figure 1a). At the bottom foundation of a hall facing the temple tank are five panels of sculptural representations, each portraying the figure of a dwarf playing an aerophone. Two of them are seen playing instruments resembling *nāgasvaram* with clearly conical bodies (Figures 1b, 1c). In particular, the panel located far right (Figure 1b) shows a part of the instrument that resembles the staple.⁷

a. Overview.



Figure 1. Also, these figures include a, b, and c which are sculpted panels of the instruments resembling *nāgasvaram* (Melkote, Mandya District, Karnataka).

b. Panel 1.



c. Panel 2.



Probably the best sculptural examples of a *nāgasvaram*-type instrument are the three panels found at the bottom of the inside wall surrounding the Kanakasabha at the Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram (South Arcot district, Tamil Nadu) (Figure 2a). The first panel (Figure 2b) shows two male musicians playing what appear to be a *nāgasvaram* and an *ottu*.⁸ One instrument is held downward parallel to the player's body, while the other is held at an angle away from the player. In the first one, the fingers of the player placed on his instrument look as if they were opening and closing finger holes, whereas in the second the position of hands and fingers suggests that the player is merely holding his instrument much like an *ottu* player does. The second panel (Figure 2c) shows two more males, both standing straight and facing forward. The musician on the left appears to be blowing into a conical pipe much like *nāgasvaram*, although the distal end (bell) of the instrument is broken off. In this sample, the reed and staple can be clearly seen. The musician on the right is about to hit his hand cymbals, which resemble the present-day *tālam*. The third panel (Figure 2d) shows yet another set of two male musicians. The musician on the left plays a barrel-shaped drum that is hung from his left shoulder, much as the present-day *tavil*. He plays the two heads of the drum with his hands. Facing the drummer, the musician on the right plays a clearly conical pipe. He holds the instrument away from his body as if he was projecting the sound toward the drummer. The musicians on the third panel exhibit much more movement than those on the first two panels. The drummer appears to be concentrating on his performance with his legs slightly apart and bent, and the reed-pipe player's positioning of his instrument may be a freeze of the swinging of the instrument commonly seen among contemporary *nāgasvaram* players. All six musicians in these panels wear a loose lower-body garment resembling the present-day *vēṭṭi*, with their upper torso bare. They all decorate themselves with necklaces, armbands, and bracelets.

The innermost wall where these sculptured panels are found is known as Kulottunga Cholan Tirumaligai after the Cholan king, Kulottunga I (1070–1120), who initiated the construction of the structure. Swamy states that the wall was completed during the reign of his son and successor, Vikrama (1118–1135) (1979, 57). If this theory is valid, one can assume the earliest possible date for the panels and the instruments depicted on them to be the beginning of the 12th century. S. R. Balasubramanyam, an art historian, ascribes the present structure of the Nataraja Temple to the Later Chola period (1070–1270), perhaps suggesting that no renovations were made since Vikrama had it constructed (1966, 65). However, these sculptural panels are too little damaged to have been made in the 12th century. Seeming to agree with my observation, Isaac concludes that *nāgasvaram* and *ottu* came into being by the 14th century, although she cites this iconographic evidence from Nataraja Temple (1964, 325). A noted archaeologist

a. Overview.



Figure 2. Sculpted panels of the instruments resembling those used in *periya mēḷam* ensemble (Chidambaram, South Arcot District, Tamil Nadu).

b. Panel 1 (*nāgasvaram* and *ottu*).



c. Panel 2 (*nāgasvaram* and *tāḷam*).



d. Panel 3 (*nāgasvaram* and *taviḷ*).



R. Nagasamy believes that the inner wall was reconstructed in the 16th century (personal communication 1993).

In contrast to those who advocate the Vijayanagar origin of *periya mēlam* music, a few other scholars accord its beginning to much earlier periods. Malarvizhi emphasizes the ancient origin of *nāgasvaram* on the grounds that the *uttalaveṇu* mentioned in the Rg Veda, the *vaṅgiyam* in Adiyarukku Nallar's commentary in the eleventh century to Silappadhikaram (second century A.D.), and the *peruvaṅgiyam* in the Sangam literature are direct predecessors of present-day *nāgasvaram* (n.d., 7–11).⁹ Citing the sculptural evidence at the Nataraja Temple mentioned above, Malarvizhi also argues that the structure where the sculptures are found was built in the sixth century A.D. by Simhavarman, and that *nāgasvaram* existed then (11–3), presumably discounting the possibility of the changes due to renovations. Kuppaswamy and Hariharan (1985), on the other hand, maintain that the frescoes of the Ajanta caves are the first representations of the *nāgasvaram*, suggesting its North Indian origin. However, their findings should be placed in the context of the history of reed instruments in South Asia, and the use of the term *nāgasvaram* to refer to prototypic aerophones is confusing.¹⁰

It is evident from the names of instruments mentioned in the ritual manuals and the abundance of their iconographical representations in the temple that a wide variety of instruments were once used as part of temple rituals (Isaac 1964; Sambamurthy 1976). At the Tyagarajasvami Temple in Tiruvarur, there are paintings containing valuable information on music. On the ceiling of the Devasriyan Mandapam located in the third inner corridor (*prakāram*) of the temple, the exploits of the mythical Chola king Musukunda are depicted in painted scenes. In one scene, the procession is accompanied by a number of musical instruments including those resembling the type of *nāgasvaram* used in present-day temple rituals in Tiruvarur. A number of musical instruments are also mentioned in conjunction with temple ritual in inscriptions since the Chola period (Hultzsich 1983–1984, 2/1:3).

In Tamil Nadu, *periya mēlam* music can be seen as the sole intact survivor among the many traditions of instrumental music that flourished at various periods in history, since all the other traditions of the immediate past have been recently discontinued or are on the verge of extinction. For an example of the former case, the *pañcamuhavāṭṭiyam* (“five faced instrument”) that was at one time an important instrument for many Siva temples in the Tanjavur area became obsolete in the late 1990s when its last exponent of the instrument died with no capable successors.¹¹ While insufficient salaries for temple musicians have caused the discontinuation of these traditions, the survival of *periya mēlam* music is indebted to the suitability of the instruments for playing Karnatak (South Indian classical) music and the acquisition of the status as the indispensable element at domestic functions.

The Nāgasvaram Tradition in Tiruvarur

While scholars date the origin of the *nāgasvaram* to around 1400, *periya mēlam* musicians, especially those of the older generation, assert that *nāgasvaram* and *tavil* came into existence simultaneously when the very first temple was established in South India (Sankaran 1976, 17; B. M. Sundaram 1986, 76). Although the historical depth of the *periya mēlam*'s association with the temple rituals cannot be determined from this belief, it clearly reflects the widely held notion of the *periya mēlam*'s initial connection with temple rituals and festivals.

Musicians from the Tanjavur area tell a more specific story. They claim that the temple *periya mēlam* tradition developed in Tiruvarur, at the temple built for the deity Tyagaraja,¹² where hereditary musicians have served the temple since the Chola period (850–1278). Presumed descendants of such a family possess palm-leaf manuscripts, which record their genealogy for the last 20 generations.¹³

According to the same manuscript, the *nāgasvaram* was bestowed by Siva from Kailash Mountain at the request of a mythical Chola emperor, Musukunda, when Siva visited Tiruvarur manifesting himself as Tyagaraja. This monogenetic origin myth of *nāgasvaram* is followed by a story that explains the dissemination of *nāgasvaram* music to other temples in the Chola kingdom. The musicians in Tiruvarur maintain that when the rain was successfully induced by the performance of *nāgasvaram* musicians from Tiruvarur during a severe drought, Rajendra Chola I (1012–1044), the ruler of the Chola, recognized the power (*śakti*) inherent in the instrument and ordered the other temples in his territory to establish similar traditions.¹⁴ As a sign of his appreciation of this miraculous performance, Rajendra Chola presented the musicians with two ivory *nāgasvarams*, which have survived until today (T. S. Latchappa Pillai, personal communication 1986).¹⁵

Although no historical evidence has so far been found to support the incident surrounding Rajendra Chola's gift, this origin myth constitutes a part of the strong conceptual association of *nāgasvaram* music with the deity Siva. Although the *nāgasvaram* is played both at Siva and Vishnu temples today, its primary connection with Siva is emphasized by musicians in their explanations concerning the construction of the instrument and the sound organization of its music. The *sīvālī*, a term used for the reed of the *nāgasvaram*, is said to derive either from *siva lingam*, the phallic symbol of Siva which the shape of the staple (*keṇḍai*) resembles, or from *siva oli*, the sounds of Siva. Another symbolic association of *nāgasvaram* music with Siva is manifested in the importance of the number five, which represents the five aspects of Siva. The *sīvālī* is explained to be composed of five parts, each representing *namasivāyā* ("obesance of Siva"), the five sacred syllables (*pañcaksara*) of Siva. The *tavil* also has its own story

that connects the instrument to the Hindu pantheon. The Abhinava Bharata Sarasamgraha, a Sanskrit work by Mummadi Chikka Bhupala (c. 1670 A.D.), explains that the *dōlu* was created by the ten-faced demon, Ravana or Ravanaesvara, to awaken his brother, Kumbhakarna, from his deep slumber (B. M. Sundaram 1986, 78). As Ravana is usually depicted as a devotee of Siva, the association of *nāgasvaram* music with Siva is once again emphasized.

Regardless of the legitimacy of a claim that Tiruvarur has been the center of *periya mēlam* music since the Chola period, *periya mēlam* musicians and patrons all believe that the Tyagarajaswami Temple in Tiruvarur has retained the most elaborate and systematized temple tradition for the last 2 centuries, and that the tradition of many other temples is based upon the practice in Tiruvarur (Sankaran 1990, 34).

Most patrons and aficionados of Karnatak music identify Tiruvarur primarily as the birthplace of the three most influential saint-composers of the early 19th century (Tyagaraja, Muttusvami Diksitar, and Syama Sastri), collectively known as the *mummūritthal* or in English, The Musical Trinity or simply The Trinity. The time of these three composers is widely considered the highest point in the history of South Indian music (Rangaramanuja Ayyangar 1972; Sambamurthy 1985, 66–8), and their compositions continue to form the most important repertoire in Karnatak music. Much less known is that Ramasami Diksitar (1735–1817), the father of one of the Trinity (Muttusvami Diksitar), is credited for the systematization and codification of the *periya mēlam* tradition at the Tyagarajaswami Temple (Sankaran 1976; Sambamurthy 1985, 125). Ramasami was an orthodox Smartha Brahman from Virinchipuram (North Arcot district) who was a musician and Sanskrit scholar conversant in the religious scripture known as *āhamam* (Agama) (Venkatarama Aiyar 1968, 3). He moved to Tiruvarur mainly due to the unstable political situation caused by the Anglo-French conflict in northern Tamil Nadu in the late 18th century. This conflict resulted in the migration of many scholars and musicians to other areas, especially to the Tanjavur area where Maratha rulers generously patronized them. Ramasami is also said to have studied music theory with Venkatavaidyanatha Diksitar, a descendent of the famous 17th century scholar of music, Venkata-makhi (Raghavan 1975, 1).

Ramasami Diksitar established the system of playing *rāgams* according to the time of the day, and set the special compositions to be played at particular stages at daily rituals and processions (Raghavan 1975, 2; Sankaran 1976, 16).¹⁶ Although no written records of the content of his codification are available, it is generally believed that the present performance practice of the *periya mēlam* at the Tyagarajaswami Temple was firmly established at that time.

Like his father Ramasami, Muttusvami Diksitar also composed a number of songs to be performed for different deities enshrined in the temple. He also

contributed to the perpetuation of the musical tradition at the Tyagarajasvami Temple by training *periya mēlam* musicians and *dēvadāsīs* (Raghavan 1975, 7).¹⁷ The *periya mēlam* musicians and *dēvadāsīs*, in turn, have been important carriers of Dikṣitar's repertoire to the present generation (Raghavan 1975, 35–7; Sankaran 1976).¹⁸ While Muttusvami Dikṣitar is usually described in literature as a teacher who trained them, many *periya mēlam* musicians emphasize that his music was influenced heavily by their tradition. Some even claim that in many compositions Dikṣitar provided only the text which his *nāgasvaram* or *dēvadāsi* associates set to music (cf. Kersenboom-Story 1987, 42–3).¹⁹

Daily Rituals

Periya mēlam musicians divide the temple tradition (*kōyil sampradāyam*) into two main categories: (1) the daily rituals (*pūjās*) performed inside the temple and (2) the annual festivals featuring processions (*ūrvalams*) around the temple. In both categories, the center of attention to which worship is directed is the deity of the respective temple. The temples generally have a set of two images for each deity. A stone image (*mūlamūrtti*) permanently placed in the sanctum sanctorum (*mūlastāṇam*) receives the main daily rituals, whereas a metal and moveable image (*ūrṣava mūrtti*) is taken out for the procession. During each of the six daily rituals performed at prescribed times, the deity is treated as a royal personage with 16 rites of adoration, including *vāttiyam* (instrumental music).²⁰ *Periya mēlam* is the instrumental music common to all the temples, although other instruments are often used in conjunction with the *periya mēlam* ensemble at certain rituals according to the performance customs of individual temples.

The most pervasive feature of playing the *nāgasvaram* in temples is a system of playing *rāgams* appropriate to the time or time zone of the day, which in all probability developed out of the system of conducting a ritual six times a day (*shatkāla pūjā*). At each *pūjā*, a *nāgasvaram* player elaborates on a *rāgam* he has chosen from those considered suitable for the time. Until about the 1920s, the performance for each daily *pūjā* typically consisted of the elaboration of a *rāgam*. Since then, the composition on the same *rāgam* has also been played after the elaboration of a *rāgam*, influenced by the general trend toward composition-oriented repertoire (Terada 1996).

The schematic daily ritual schedule is provided in Table 1, including the names of the rituals, their approximate time of execution, and the list of *rāgams* appropriate for each ritual.²¹ The *rāgams* used in the temple can be classified into three categories according to the degree of their specificity to ritual or the time of the day. At one end of the spectrum, there are a few *rāgams* that have particularly strong associations with, and are thus played only for, specific rituals. For example, *Būpālam rāgam* is played only at the ritual called *tiruppalliyaraiyeṟucci*

Table 1. The list of *rāgams* to be performed for daily rituals

6 pūjās	Name	Time	rāgams
	Tiruppalliyaraiyeṟucci “sacred wakening in bed chamber”	5:30 a.m.	Būpālam (C-D ^b -E-G-A ^b)
1	Tiruvaṇandal (“holy morning sleep”)	6:00 a.m.	Bauḷi (C-D ^b -E-G-A ^b -C, C-B-A ^b -G-E-D ^b -C) Malayamārutam (C-D ^b -E-G-A-B ^b) Māyāmālavagauḷa (C-D ^b -E-F-G-A ^b -B) Nādanāmakriya (C-D ^b -E-F-G-A ^b -B-C, B-A ^b -G-F-E-D ^b -C-B) Rēvaguāpti (C-D ^b -E-G-A) Valaji (C-E-G-A-B ^b)
2	Kālasandi (“morning worship”)	8:00 a.m.	Ābōgi (C-D-E ^b -F-A ^b) Ārabi (C-D-F-G-A-C, C-B-A-G-F-E-D-C) Asāvēri (C-D ^b -F-G-A ^b -C, C-B ^b -C-G-A ^b -F-G-D ^b -E ^b -D-C) Bilahari (C-D-E-G-A-C, C-B-A-G-F-E-D-C) Daṇyāsi (C ^b -E ^b -F-G-B-C, C-B ^b -A ^b -G-F-E ^b -D ^b -C) Dēvagāndāri (C-D-F-G-A-C, C-B-A-G-F-E-D-C) Kēdāram (C-F-E-F-G-B-C, C-B-G-F-E-D-C) Sāvēri (CD ^b FGA ^b C, CBA ^b GFED ^b C) Sudda Baṅgāḷa (C-D-F-G-A-C, C-A-G-F-D-E ^b -D-C) Sudda Sāvēri (C-D-F-G-A) Sudda Daṇyāsi (C-E ^b -F-G-B ^b) Sūraṭi (C-D-F-G-B ^b -C, C-B ^b -A-G-F-E-G-F-D-C)
3	Uccikkālam (“mid-day”)	11:00 a.m.	Baṅgāḷa (C-D-E-F-G-F-D-G-B-C, C-B-G-F-D-E-D-C) Maṇiraṅgu (C-D-F-G-B ^b -C, C-B ^b -G-F-E ^b -D-C) Matyamāvati (C-E ^b -F [#] -G-B-C, C-B-A ^b -G-F [#] -E ^b -D-C) Srīrāgam (C-D-F-G-B ^b -C, C-B ^b -G-A-B ^b -G-F-D-E ^b -D-C)

(continued)

Table 1 (*continued*). The list of *rāgams* to be performed for daily rituals

6 pūjās	Name	Time	rāgams
4	Sāyaraccai ("evening")	5:00 p.m.	Bhairavi (C-D-E ^b -F-G-A ^b -B ^b) Darbār (C-D-F-G-A-B ^b -C, C-B ^b -A-G-F-D-E ^b -E ^b -D-C) Harikāmbōji (C-D-E-F-G-A-B ^b) Kalyāṇi (C-D-E-F [#] -G-A-B) Kāmbōji (C-D-E-F-G-A-C, C-B ^b -A-G-F-E-D-C) Karaharapriyā (C-D-E ^b -F-G-A-B ^b) Nātakuranji (C-D-E-F-A-B ^b -C, C-B ^b -A-F-E-D-E-F-G-E-D-C) Pandumarāḷi (C-D ^b -E ^b -F [#] -G-A ^b -B) Pūrvikalyāṇi (C-D ^b -E-F [#] -G-A-G-C, C-B-A-G-F [#] -E-D ^b -C) Rāmapriya (C-D ^b -E-F [#] -G-A-B ^b) Sankarābaraṇam (C-D-E-F-G-A-B) Shanmukapriya (C-D-E ^b -F [#] -G-A ^b -B ^b) Tōḍi (C-D ^b -E ^b -F-G-A ^b -B ^b)
5	Irāṇakkālam ("second time")	7:00 p.m.	Ābēri (C-E ^b -F-G-B ^b -C, C-B ^b -A-G-F-E ^b -D-C) Ānandabairavi (C-E ^b -D-E ^b -F-G-A ^b -G-C, C-B ^b -A ^b -G-F-E ^b -D-C) Aṭṭāṇa (C-D-F-G-B-C, C-B-A-G-F-E-D-C) Bēgaḍa (C-E-D-E-F-G-A-B-C, C-B-A-G-F-E-D-C) Kānaḍa (C-D-F-A-B-C, C-B-G-F-E-F-D-C) Kēdāragaula (C-D-F-G-B ^b -C, C-B ^b -A-G-F-E-D-C) Mōhanam (C-D-E-G-A) Simēndramadyamam (C-D-E ^b -F [#] -G-A ^b -B)
6	Arttājāmam ("midnight")	9:00 p.m.	Lalita (C-D ^b -E-F-A-B) Navaroj (G-A-B-C-D-E-F)
	Paḷḷiyarai sēvai ("worship at bed chamber")	9:30 p.m.	Nīlāmbari (C-D-E-F-A-B-C, C-B-G-F-E-D-E-F-E-D-E-C)

(“sacred wakening in bed chamber”) in which the deity is woken up early in the morning, whereas *Nilāmbari rāgam* is rendered when He/She is lulled to sleep at night (*paḷḷiyarai sēvai*, or “worship at bed chamber”). The performance of *Būpālam* and *Nilāmbari rāgams* derived from the previous practice of *dēvadāsis* singing songs composed in these *rāgams* at these two rituals.²² Since the abolition of the institution of *dēvadāsis*, *nāgasvaram* musicians have absorbed that function. Here, the *nāgasvaram* is played alone without the *tavil* and *tālam* accompaniment, and the player usually improvises freely on these *rāgams* rather than playing the songs previously sung by *dēvadāsis*. Another example of the first category is *Gambīra Nāṭṭai rāgam* (C–E–F–G–B), played only at the commencement of the procession, which will be discussed in the next section.

In the second group, which includes most *rāgams*, each *rāgam* is associated with one of the six daily rituals, and is not played at any other time of the day. However, it is the *nāgasvaram* musician’s decision whether that *rāgam* is to be actually played, since there are at least several other *rāgams* considered appropriate to the same ritual time period.

The third type consists of a few *rāgams* considered suitable for any ritual time of the day, although they are performed more frequently at a certain ritual time. For example, *rāgams* such as *Nātakuraṅgi* and *Darbār* can be played at any time of the day, although they still assume some association with the *Sāyaraccai* and are played more frequently during that ritual. *Hamsadvāṇi rāgam* (C–D–E–G–B), in contrast, has no particular association with any ritual time, although musicians agree that it sounds best in the evening. Since *Hamsadvāṇi* is a relatively new *rāgam* (presumably created by Ramasami Diksitar himself), it might not have been codified into the system.

According to *nāgasvaram* musicians, this system of playing *rāgams* appropriate to the times of the day was observed in most temples in the Tanjavur area until around the mid-1950s, and it is still maintained in some temples where older orthodox *nāgasvaram* musicians provide music.²³ The practice of offering a *pūjā* with *periya mēlam* music six times a day is now maintained only at a handful of temples,²⁴ and less important daily rituals have been either discontinued altogether or exercised in a simplified manner without *periya mēlam* accompaniment. Among the daily rituals, *Sāyaraccai* is the longest, the most elaborate, and the most important both for worshippers and *periya mēlam* musicians. It is an evening *pūjā* that lasts 1 1/2 to 2 hours from around 5:00 p.m. More worshippers visit the temple during the *Sāyaraccai* than at any other of the daily rituals (Kersenboom-Story 1987, 112–3). Should the accompaniment of *periya mēlam* music be omitted for any of the daily rituals at a given temple, the *Sāyaraccai* would be the last *pūjā* to be eliminated. In many small temples, the *periya mēlam* is performed only during the *Sāyaraccai* (Figure 3).²⁵



Figure 3. *Periya mēḷam* musicians playing during the *Sāyaraccai* ritual at the Kapalisvara Temple in Chennai (2006).

Calendrical Festivals

Other important performing contexts for *periya mēḷam* music are temple festivals conducted periodically according to the Hindu calendar. Among many festivals, the annually performed *tiruvīṇā* (or *bramotsva* in Sanskrit) is the most important not only for each temple but also for *periya mēḷam* musicians. The scheduling of the *tiruvīṇā* differs depending on the local tradition, but usually lasts for 10 days. In the case of Kapalisvara Temple in Chennai, the *tiruvīṇā* takes place in the month of *Paṅguṇi* (March/April) whereas Minakshi Temple in Madurai holds it in the month of *Chittirai* (April/May). At the famous temples such as those mentioned above, a different *periya mēḷam* ensemble is engaged for each day of the festival. Regardless of the fame and ability of the musician attached to the temple (*dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ*), he and his group are assigned for the performance for at least 1 day during the festival. This custom is usually explained as giving due respect to the *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇs*. The performance responsibility of a visiting ensemble (*veḷi mēḷam*) is confined to the music for the procession, and sometimes a musical concert (*kaccēri*) on the platform within the temple compound at night (Figure 4).²⁶ The daily *pūjā* is performed as usual to the accompaniment of the *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇs* of the temple during the festival.



Figure 4. Visiting *nāgasvaram* musicians (Sankarankoil Suryanarayanan and Palanivelu) performing during the *tiruvīṛā* at the Kapalisvara Temple in Chennai (1987).

The trustees of the temple make the selection of the visiting *periya mēlam* ensemble on the basis of the musicians' reputation. In some cases, the *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇs* of the temple and *rasikars* (connoisseurs, enthusiasts) of *periya mēlam* music make suggestions concerning potential candidates to the less musically inclined trustees, who are ignorant of or indifferent to the relative competence of different musicians (Tiruvalaputtur Balu, personal communication 1989). *Periya mēlam* musicians contrast the temple trustees in the past who kept the quality of music high with their knowledge and interest, to those today who show little, if not at all, interest in music. While well-established musicians with statewide popularity would only accept invitations that are offered with utmost respect, many other musicians seek performance opportunities by writing to temple trustees. The annual festival, especially at a well-known temple, is a public event par excellence, drawing thousands of worshippers from wide areas, and participation in such a festival is highly prestigious and provides the musicians with effective publicity. A list of participating ensembles is displayed within the temple compound (Figure 5) or included in the written announcements circulated before the festival.

The highlight of the annual festivals is the daily procession (*ūrvalam*) of the deity on a palanquin or on a variety of vehicles (*vāhaṇam*) depicting aspects



Figure 5. Display of the list of invited *nāgasvaram* musicians for the annual festival at the Kapalisvara Temple in Mylapore, Madras (1987).

of the deity's qualities and deeds. For worshippers, seeing the deity during the procession is extremely auspicious. The temple compound is considered the deity's territory and people go there to see the deity in ordinary circumstances, whereas the deity gives a special favor to visit the sphere of the humans during the procession.

As mentioned earlier, temples have a set of two images for the deity: the metal image of the deity taken out for the procession (*ursava mūrtti*) and the stone image of the same deity permanently placed in the sanctum sanctorum. The *ursava mūrtti* is placed on the palanquin or a vehicle prescribed for the day, and decorated elaborately with flower garlands before the procession. While some *vāhaṇams* are clearly related to the mythology of the deity, the significance of others is less certain. *Sesha* (snake), *Garuda* (bird), *Simha* (lion), and *Hanuman* (monkey king) are the common vehicles for the deity during the procession, but the pattern of assigning vehicles during the festival differs from temple to temple. The procession is made on the four streets surrounding the temple compound, always in the direction of circumambulation, keeping their right side toward the temple, and is accompanied by royal umbrellas, fans, and *periya mēlam* music.

In describing the *periya mēlam* music during the procession, I will first discuss the practices prevalent until around the 1930s, and then some of the important changes that have occurred since then. While changes in the performance

practice of the procession and the accompanying *nāgasvaram* have been gradual, the description of the past practice given below is a prototypical one which musicians and lay worshippers tend to provide. Since temple procession is the performance context in which the musicians and patrons evaluate the musical ability of great musicians such as T. N. Rajarattinam Pillai, the following description is meant to provide a sense of what it might have been like to witness them in performance.²⁷

The procession in the past started around 9:00 p.m., moved in a leisurely pace, making several stops along the route, and ended at dawn.²⁸ From the point of view of musicians and *rasikars*, the temple procession is the most suitable performance context for *periya mēlam* music because of the sheer length of time available for performance and the absence of distraction. In this performance context, the method of playing extensive improvisation in free rhythm and other highly improvisational forms developed as musicians were expected to display their talents and compete with each other. Although back-to-back performances involving more than one ensemble in a given procession were not the norm, the presence of rival musicians created a fiercely competitive atmosphere among musicians.

The performance rules maintained at certain temples also accelerated the competitiveness of performances during the procession. For example, at the famous temple of Nataraja in Chidambaram, it is still customary that at the beginning of the procession *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ* plays for a short while a *rāgam* of his choice, which has to be played by the visiting *nāgasvaram* musician, no matter how limited the scope of the *rāgam* may be for extensive elaboration.

When taken out through the east gate tower (*gōpuram*) of the temple for the procession, the deity stopped just outside the entrance. This moment marks the beginning of the procession of the deity (*sāmi purappāḍu* or *purappāḍu*). The tavil player played the short rhythmic prelude known as *alārippu* in *kaṇḍa naḍai* (the subdivision of a beat into five segments), which was believed to correspond to the five faces of Siva.²⁹ Immediately following this, the instrumental composition known as *mallāri* was played by the entire ensemble, consisting of a *nāgasvaram*, a *tavil*, an *ottu*, and a *tālam*. Sankaran believes that the term *mallāri* is related to *malla* (wrestle), based on the importance of martial arts at previous temple festivals and the musicians' characterization of *mallāri* as "wrestling with god" to make the deity set out for procession (Kersenboom-Story 1987, 77–8).³⁰

While a *mallāri* was set in different *tālam*s (rhythmic cycles), the *rāgam* in which it was played was always *Gambīra Nāṭṭai*.³¹ The *mallāri* had a relatively simple and short melodic line (often two rhythmic cycles long), which was to be played in three different speeds (*kālam*s) and in different subdivisions of beats (*naḍai*s).³² With the exception of the performance in the slowest speed,

the melodic embellishments (*gamakams*) were kept to a minimum, and precision in executing complex cross-rhythms in relation to the chosen *tālam* was the most important criterion of the successful rendition. The *mallāri* was to be played exclusively at the beginning of the procession on *nāgasvaram*, and never at any other stages of the procession nor in other contexts in which *nāgasvaram* might be heard. Often a short exposition in the same *rāgam* preceded the rendition of the *mallāri*.³³

After the *mallāri*, the musicians turned around and led the procession out to the street, as the *nāgasvaram* player started playing the main *rāgam* of his choice for the evening. A *rāgam* suitable for extensive improvisation was usually chosen, for he would elaborate on the *rāgam* for 1–2 hours (or even longer) depending upon his ability and mood. Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, for example, remembers that Chinna Pakkiri played *Bēgaḍa rāgam* for 6 hours (1977, 2). Unlike in Karnatak music, the *tavil* player provides rhythmic accompaniment, albeit sporadic and unobtrusive, when the *nāgasvaram* player elaborates on a *rāgam*. Between sections of the *nāgasvaram* playing, short but rhythmically dense interludes (*uruttuccol*) are occasionally played.

The ensemble then typically played a *pallavi* in the same *rāgam*, which would last for another 2 hours or so. The *pallavi* employs a single line of text, often set in an unusual and difficult *tālam*, *naḍai*, and *eḍuppu*,³⁴ as the basis of extensive improvisation. The *pallavi* is a form in which a musician's technical skills and knowledge for improvisation are rigorously tested. Along with free-rhythm elaboration of *rāgams*, the *pallavi* was considered the specialty of *periya mēlam* musicians, and some believe that the performance practice of this form itself was developed by their ancestors and was later adopted in Karnatak music.³⁵

A long extended *pallavi* was usually followed by a *tavil* solo, which was customarily set in the *tālam* of the *pallavi* just completed. This was the only time, for the *tavil* played to show off his skill extensively since he was an accompanist in the embryonic sense of the word, and the *nāgasvaram* musician tolerated no flashy interruption in any other parts of the procession. Perhaps the insertion of a *tavil* solo itself was originally meant to give some rest to the *nāgasvaram* player around the midpoint of the procession, by which time he had continuously played for 3–4 hours. The *tavil* solo typically lasted about 1 hour.

Only after this, a few compositions (*kīrttaṇais*) were played with shorter *rāgam* elaborations preceding them. At this point, an improvisational form of theme and variations known as *rakti mēlam* (or simply, *rakti*, “charm”) (Vayapuri Piḷḷai 1982, 3417) might also be played. As in the case of the *mallāri*, the *rakti mēlam* was a repertoire exclusive to *periya mēlam* musicians. This instrumental form had no textual basis. The melodies were first constructed on the rhythmic formula (*tin taka ta dīt tāt*) and an infinite number of variations could be obtained by stretching and modifying the formula in such a way that the last

syllable (*tai*) of the phrase will end on the first beat of the rhythmic cycle. It was always set in *Misra Chāpu tālam* (3+2+2). While any *rāgam* may be selected, *rāgams* such as *Nātakuranji*, *Kīravāṇi*, *Kāmbōji*, and *Tōḍi* are considered suitable for the *rakti mēlam* (Sankaran 1986, 68).³⁶ The *rakti mēlam* was regarded as the most technically demanding form in *periya mēlam* music, and some believe it to be the predecessor of the *pallavi* (B. M. Sundaram 1977). The performance of the *rakti mēlam* was confined to the Tanjavur area, and one family of *nāgasvaram* musicians from Sembonnarkoyil village was particularly known for their expertise in this repertoire, with Sembonnarkoyil Ramasami Piḷḷai (1880–1923) as its greatest exponent.³⁷ Although the performance of the *rakti mēlam* was optional at a given procession, a few temples had an unwritten performance code that required the inclusion of the *rakti mēlam* for participating musicians.³⁸

Toward the end of the procession, a few light compositions such as *padam*, *jāvaḷi*, and *tiruppugaḷ* were played.³⁹ Just as the beginning of the procession was marked by the *mallāri*, its end was highlighted by a special composition known as *Heccarika* (in *Sāvēri rāgam*, *Rūpakam tālam*) as the deity went back into the temple (Figure 6) (Tiruvarur S. Latchappa Piḷḷai and Sembonnarkoil Vaidhyanatha Piḷḷai, personal communications 2003).

If we are to accept the concept of *nādam* (sound) as the manifestation of the deity, the performance of the *periya mēlam* during the procession may be its



Figure 6. *Periya mēlam* musicians playing *Heccarika* immediately before the god's return to the sanctum.

prime example. Many of those who witnessed the all-night processions with *nāgasvaram* music confess to have felt the presence of the deity in the music itself. For this reason, some even claim that the *nāgasvaram* is the most important element of the festival, in fact more important than the image of the deity since the sound of the *periya mēḷam* is regarded as the manifestation of god's presence (Madurai G. S. Mani and N. Sivaramakrishnan, personal communications 1987; Balakrishnan, personal communication 1989).

A number of differences exist between the temple procession up until about the 1930s described above and the present practice. In fact, in no other context are the changes that have occurred in *periya mēḷam* music more marked in magnitude and symptomatic of the general trend than in temple procession. First of all, the duration of the procession as a whole has become considerably shorter. The all-night procession in the past has been shortened to the one that ends around 1:00 or 2:00 a.m., giving musicians only about half as much time as before for their performance. The poor attendance after midnight and the changing taste of the patrons are said to be the two main reasons for finishing up the procession earlier. However, the most important change was the shift of emphasis in repertoire from extended improvisation to compositions. The *rāgam* elaboration and other improvisational forms are no longer main items of performance. The *rāgam* elaboration has become more of a prelude to the composition that follows. The frequency of rendering a *pallavi*, the essential item during the procession before, has notably decreased, whereas the *rakti mēḷam* is virtually obsolete and only an object of nostalgic reflection among old-timers. Even when *kīrttaṇais* were played, they were essentially the vehicles for improvisation, whereas today many compositions are played in succession without extensive improvisation, and some musicians even play popular film songs to please the crowd.

Temple Musicians

The *periya mēḷam* musicians attached to the temple and responsible for providing music for the ritual occasions requiring it are known as *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇs*. As the leader of the ensemble, the *nāgasvaram* musician receives from the temple management the monthly salary (*sambalam*) for the entire ensemble, which he then distributes to his accompanists at the mutually agreed rate (*paṇḍu* or "share"). The *nāgasvaram* musician also has the right to select his accompanists, although he usually plays with a *tavil* musician from the family with which his family has been associated. In other words, when a *nāgasvaram* musician leaves his position of *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇs*, his son or other successor will play with the *tavil* musician who has played with the retiring player.

For practical reasons, the *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇs* live within walking distance of the temple they serve on a daily basis. When the temple provides the house for musicians, it is often located on one of the four streets surrounding the temple compound. Although many temples in the past offered land, a house, provisions, and a share of *prasādam* (food offering to the deity) to *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇs*, only a handful of wealthy temples provide these privileges to musicians today.⁴⁰

The *nāgasvaram* musician, especially if he is well-known, tends not to play for daily rituals himself, but instead sends one of his disciples. It is true that some senior *nāgasvaram* musicians play for daily rituals themselves regarding their daily service at the temple as a sacred duty, but the presence of the *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ* is mandatory only at the calendrical festivals and other important occasions. By sending his disciple to fulfill his daily performance responsibility, he also makes himself available for domestic functions. Some musicians in the past are known for never having skipped the temple duty for other engagements, but the prevailing discourse on such pious musicians appears to indicate that they were rather exceptions (cf. Tanihai 1990).

Although the majority of temples today employ only one set of *periyā mēlam* musicians, some wealthy temples such as the Minakshi Temple in Madurai have two sets. In this case, each set has a responsibility to provide music every half month, and both ensembles are expected to participate in annual festivals and other special occasions.⁴¹ In the Tyagarajasvami Temple in Tiruvarur, four families of *nāgasvaram* musicians were responsible for temple service for 7–8 days a month until the early decades of the present century. Three families became defunct since then with no successors, and the remaining family has absorbed their duties.

The position of the *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ* is ambivalent in several important ways. On the one hand, service at temples is regarded as a sacred privilege and responsibility given to the *periyā mēlam* musicians by the deity, and much pride in their association with their temples and their continuous contribution through a number of generations is discernible especially among senior musicians. On the other hand, negative connotations have been attached to the *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇs* who perform only at the temple, as compared to those who play for various other contexts and those who can afford not to be attached to the temples. The usage of the term *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ* assumes a slight air of ostentation for those musicians without sufficient recognition, and only accomplished musicians are addressed or address themselves as such without drawing a comment or gesture of disapproval.

The appointment of the *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ* was mostly hereditary until around the 1940s when a son of a *nāgasvaram* musician had few occupational options or desires other than to succeed his father. Many families have had the hereditary

positions at the temple for at least several generations in direct patrilineal transmission, even if only the traceable predecessors are counted. Many widely recognized families of *nāgasvaram* musicians trace their traditions for four to five generations. Although an exceptional case, a family of musicians attached to the Tyagarajasvami Temple in Tiruvarur possess, as mentioned earlier, a manuscript containing the names of musicians of the last 20 generations.

However, while the eldest son's right to succeed his father's position was observed in principle, the difficulty of and the varying aptitude toward the instrument prevented the automatic transmission of the temple position to him in practice. When the eldest son did not achieve enough proficiency, one of the other able, younger sons or a close relative succeeded to the position.

The present generation, however, is witnessing the finale of such hereditary transmission of the temple position. Monthly salary from the temples has not kept up with the rate of inflation, forcing many hereditary musicians out of their profession. *Periya mēlam* musicians claim that this explains the discontinuation of the profession in many of their lineages, including, as its extreme case, the virtual extinction of *ottu* players who obtained a much smaller share of remuneration. Poor living conditions resulting from the insufficient remuneration have fueled the decreasing respect toward *periya mēlam* musicians.

The monthly salary to the *periya mēlam* musicians is meager, except at a handful of wealthy temples. In the second half of the 1980s, the monthly remuneration from most temples ranged between 150 and 500 rupees, which was usually less than a musician would receive from one engagement at domestic functions such as a wedding ceremony. The amount of remuneration had often remained the same for as long as 20 years. The actual decrease of income from temples has affected the entire community of *periya mēlam* musicians, but especially threatened the life of the less talented musicians who receive few opportunities for lucrative performances outside the temple. *Periya mēlam* musicians believe this to be the main cause for the tendency among the younger generation to abandon their hereditary profession. Although public pleas have been made repeatedly by influential *nāgasvaram* musicians, caste organizations, and supporters of *periya mēlam* music for governmental aid to remedy the insufficient salary from temples, the situation has not yet noticeably improved.⁴²

The dire economic conditions of temple staff including *periya mēlam* musicians today can be regarded as an epiphenomenon of the continuous attempts by the non-Brahman political organizations to transfer the authority to control temple administration from Brahmins to the state (Rajagopal 1985, 66–82). One of the major targets of this religious reform movement was the hereditary trustees, many of whom were Brahmins and enthusiastic patrons of music (Raghavan 1958). The Madras Religious Endowments Act of 1927, though weak

in its actual impact, marked the beginning of government control over powerful independent temples, and was extended by each revision and amendment. After 1970, the trusteeship became a position appointed by the state government (Kennedy 1974, 286).

Periya mēḷam musicians claim that the inadequate salary from the temples is a direct result of the indifference of contemporary trustees who have the authority to fix salaries for *periya mēḷam* musicians as well as to hire or dismiss them (Shankari 1984, 173). Although the primary reason for government takeovers was to curtail allegedly widespread corruption and mismanagement of temple funds, the appointment of trustees became contingent mostly on party politics and often a form of rewarding faithful party members (Malhotra 1972, 11; Venkatramani 1984). Thus, the new trustees often exhibited little understanding of the significance of rituals and the music associated with them.

With the increasing options for other occupations and the insufficient remuneration from temples, little economic incentive exists for sons of *nāgasvaram* musicians to continue the family tradition, often leaving the hereditary temple position open. This has created an opportunity to become a *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ* for those who would previously have had less access to the position. When the position becomes vacant, the retiring *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ* attempts to recommend one of his competent relatives, often his son-in-law, to the temple trustee. The retiring musician's recommendation often creates hard feelings among those who are not selected against their expectation.

Despite the meager compensation from the temple, however, the position of *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ* is important for musicians for a different reason. Apart from many older musicians' belief in playing music for the deity as a sacred privilege, the temple also serves as a venue for efficient publicity for the musician. Musicians are aware that impressive performances at temple rituals and festivals, or even their mere presence there, are noticed by potential sponsors and bring opportunities for more lucrative engagements for marriage ceremonies.

As in the case of temples, many monasteries (known as *madams*) have *periya mēḷam* musicians who play for the daily *pūjā*. In addition, three non-Brahman *ādīṇams* (monastic centers) in Tanjavur district, which are important parental madams exercising control over subordinate madams, also appoint *periya mēḷam* musicians as *ādīṇa vittuvāṇs* in addition to those who play for the daily service.⁴³ The performance responsibility of *ādīṇa vittuvāṇs* is confined to the annual festivals and other special occasions. For example, the *ādīṇam* in Tiruvavadudurai (Mayuram taluk),⁴⁴ the *ādīṇa vittuvāṇs* are expected to play only at two types of special occasions: the 10-day annual festival known as *Radasaptami Utsavam* in the month of Tai (January/February) and at the bimonthly *Nataraja Abisekam* which lasts only for 1 day. The *ādīṇa vittuvāṇs* are given an honorary salary (*gaurava sambaḷam*) each month as a tangible token or acknowledgment of their

association with the *āḍiṇam*. They are paid throughout the year including the months when they have no performance obligations. A considerable amount (100 *kalams*) of unhusked rice (*nel*) is also given to them once a year after the harvest season (Injikkudi Kandasami Pillai, personal communication 1987).⁴⁵ During the annual festival, other *periya mēḷam* ensembles (*siṛappu mēḷam* or “special *periya mēḷam* ensemble”) are invited, usually one per day, and the *āḍiṇa vittuvāṇ* (*āḍiṇa mēḷam* or *maḍattu mēḷam*) serves as the host to the other visiting musicians during the performances.

The position of *āḍiṇa vittuvāṇ* carries much higher prestige for *nāgasvaram* musicians than that of *dēvastāṇa vittuvāṇ*. In turn, the *āḍiṇa vittuvāṇs* are the pride of their *āḍiṇams*. Only some of the best musicians in the past, such as Rajaratnam Pillai mentioned earlier, were appointed to these positions, and that was perhaps instigated by the rivalry among three *āḍiṇams* or between these three non-Brahman *āḍiṇams* and the Brahman-oriented Sankaracharya *āḍiṇams*, such as the ones in Kanchipuram and Kumbakonam. The positions of *āḍiṇa vittuvāṇ* were not generally hereditary and were filled according to musicians’ ability and fame, although the close association, either by blood or through discipleship, with the previous *āḍiṇa vittuvāṇ* often influenced the decision.⁴⁶ The generous gifts, such as a gold coin and the *nāgasvaram* covered with gold or silver foil, have been bestowed by the *āḍiṇams* both to the *āḍiṇa vittuvāṇs* and visiting musicians, either as an appreciation of a particularly fine performance or more commonly as the recognition of a musician’s accumulated achievements.⁴⁷

Princely courts had a number of musicians on their payroll, including those who played *nāgasvaram*. As in the case of *āḍiṇa vittuvāṇs*, the responsibility of court *nāgasvaram* musicians (*āstāṇa vittuvāṇ*) was confined to a few special occasions, while a monthly salary was paid to them throughout the year. Madurai Ponnusami Pillai (1879–1930), who was attached to the Mysore court during the reign of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV (1897–1940), traveled to Mysore only twice a year on the maharaja’s birthday and Dasara festival from Madurai where he lived all his life. Ponnusami Pillai was a pride of the Mysore court, and he was given a number of monetary awards and expensive gifts from the maharaja (Anon. 1980). A figure of Ponnusami Pillai is drawn on the wall inside the Marriage Hall in the Mysore court palace.

The majority of *periya mēḷam* musicians who serve at temples and monasteries in the Tanjavur and Madurai area belong to a non-Brahman caste of *Isai Vēḷāḷar* (“cultivators of music”). In other areas of South India, *periya mēḷam* musicians belong to various non-Brahman castes such as *Maruttuvar* (northern Tamil Nadu), *Pariyāri* (central Tamil Nadu), *Paṇḍāram* (southern Tamil Nadu), *Kambar* (southern Tamil Nadu and Kerala), *Mudaliyar* (western Tamil

Nadu), *Nāidu* and *Maṅgala* (Andhra Pradesh), *Bajantri* (Karnataka), and *Nāyar* (Kerala). *Maruttuvar*, *Pariyāri*, *Bajantri*, *Nāidu*, and *Maṅgala* are referred to, often contemptuously, as “barber castes,” as their primary occupational affiliation is barbering, which denotes a low social status. There are also communities of Muslim *periya mēḷam* musicians in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh and the Madurai region of Tamil Nadu. *Isai Vēḷāḷars* are undisputed originators of *periya mēḷam* music and their historical role and artistic excellence are seldom questioned by those in other areas (Terada 1992, 174–243).

Individual Traditions

Apart from the common performance practice, many individual temples have distinct features that relate to the compositions, *rāgam*s, and instruments to be played as part of their daily rituals and calendrical festivals. What follows is not an exhaustive list of local variations but a description of a few prominent examples to illustrate the parameter of such variations (see Figure 7 for a map of important locations).

The Hindu saints have, for centuries, made pilgrimages to a number of temples where, inspired by the divine presence, they wrote songs praising the presiding deities. The tradition of praising the deity in song form dates back at least to the period of the early *bhakti* movement in South India (sixth to ninth centuries A.D.) when a number of poet-saints composed hymns with fervid devotion (*bhakti*) at the various sacred sites they visited (Nilakanta Sastri 1963, 35–48). Today, these hymns are sung by a group of temple servants known as *ōdūvārs* and *aṛaiyars* attached to the Siva and Vishnu temples, respectively.⁴⁸ Many compositions by the *mummūrttiḥal* which constitute the major portion of the repertoire of present-day Karnatak music are believed to have been composed in this manner either at the temples themselves or at the places where the temples are located (Sambamurthy 1970, 1985).

Playing the compositions in praise of the deity appears appropriate not only because the deity in question is the object and *raison d'être* of these compositions, but also because the composer's devotion and spiritual relationship with the deity can be transcended through time and reexperienced through its performance. Some of these compositions have achieved sanctity in themselves and have become associated with part of the status of the deity's personal property, not to be utilized for any other purposes. The performance of these compositions is restricted only for the deity in question. For example, when Muttusvami Diksitar visited the Akshayalingasvami Temple in Kilvelur (Tanjavur *taluk*), he composed a *kīrttaṇai* in Sankarābaraṇam *rāgam* (*Akshayalingavibhō*) praising its presiding deity.⁴⁹ While played daily in the temple by *periya mēḷam* musicians, this

composition for domestic functions is consciously avoided in Kilvelur and the surrounding area (Kilvelur N. G. Ganesan, personal communication 1987).⁵⁰

Another example is found at the Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Tiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) in Kerala. In this temple, nothing but Swati Tirunal's compositions on his guardian deity, Padmanabhaswamy, may be played on *nāgasvaram*, except for the textually neutral *rāgam* elaboration and purely instrumental compositions such as *mallāri*. The Padmanabhaswamy Temple is one of a few temples to retain the highly systematized performance practice. Musicians play only a *rāgam* or a *rāgam* and a *kīrttaṇai* in the same *rāgam* prescribed for each of four daily rituals. For example, there is a list of four compositions (in *Māyāmālavagauḷa*, *Bilahari*, *Nādanāmakriya*, and *Mōhanam rāgams*) prescribed for the first ritual of the day around 4:30 a.m., of which one composition is selected by the *nāgasvaram* musician depending on his mood. The *rāgam* of the chosen composition is played for 10–15 minutes first. In contrast, at the second pūjā of the day at around 10:30 a.m., one of the five *rāgams* (*Dāṇyāsi*, *Sāvēri*, *Srīrāgam*, *Simēndramadyamam*, and *Matyamāvatī*) is played for about 30 minutes, and no compositions are played then (Nataraja Kambar, personal communication 1987). The *nāgasvaram* played in this temple are higher in pitch (5 1/2 *kaṭṭai* or G[#] as tonic pitch) and shorter (about 2 feet long) than the kinds most commonly used today (2 *kaṭṭai* or D, about 3 feet long). When not in use, the instruments are always kept in a room inside the temple, and taking them out of the temple compound is strictly prohibited.⁵¹

Certain *rāgams* may be considered appropriate for a deity on the basis of the compatibility between the *rasa* which a *rāgam* evokes and the disposition of a deity. The exclusive association between *Mōhanam rāgam* and the deity Ahoramurti at the Svetesvaranyasvami Temple in Tiruvengadu (Sirkazhi taluk, Tanjavur district) is a good example (Narayanaswamy 1982; Sambamurthy 1982b, 230). Playing this *rāgam*, either in its improvisational elaboration or compositions, outside of the temple contexts is forbidden in Tiruvengadu. In this case, Ahoramurti is described to be the furious aspect of Siva (Jagadisa Ayyar 1982, 262), and the *vīra* (heroic) *rasa* with which *Mōhanam rāgam* has a strong association is believed to be suited to the deity's disposition (Darumapuram A. Govindarajan, personal communication 1989).

Special types of instruments may be employed according to the tradition of individual temples. The Kumbesvarasvami Temple in Kumbakonam (Tanjavur district) was known for its regular performance on a *nāgasvaram* made of soap stone until the death of its last player Kunjidapadam Piḷḷai in the early 1980s.⁵²

Some temples have a tradition of playing the *muhaviṇai*, a small double-reed instrument with a limited range (one and half octave), as part of the temple ritual with the *tavil* accompaniment. The *muhaviṇai* is used as part of the ensemble accompanying the *terukkūttu* dance drama (Frasca 1990, 28–9), and was once

used to accompany Bharata Natyam until it was replaced by flute and clarinet. Presumably, the use of the *muhaviṇai* was prevalent until the early decades of the 20th century, but only a handful of temples use this instrument today. One such example is the Vaittiyanadasvami Temple in Vaidesvarankoyil (Tanjavur district) where the *muhaviṇai* is played once a day by a *nāgasvaram* musician attached to the temple. The Sankaracharia Adinam in Kanchipuram also had an *ādiṇa vittuvāṇ* who played the *muhaviṇai* until around 1980.⁵³

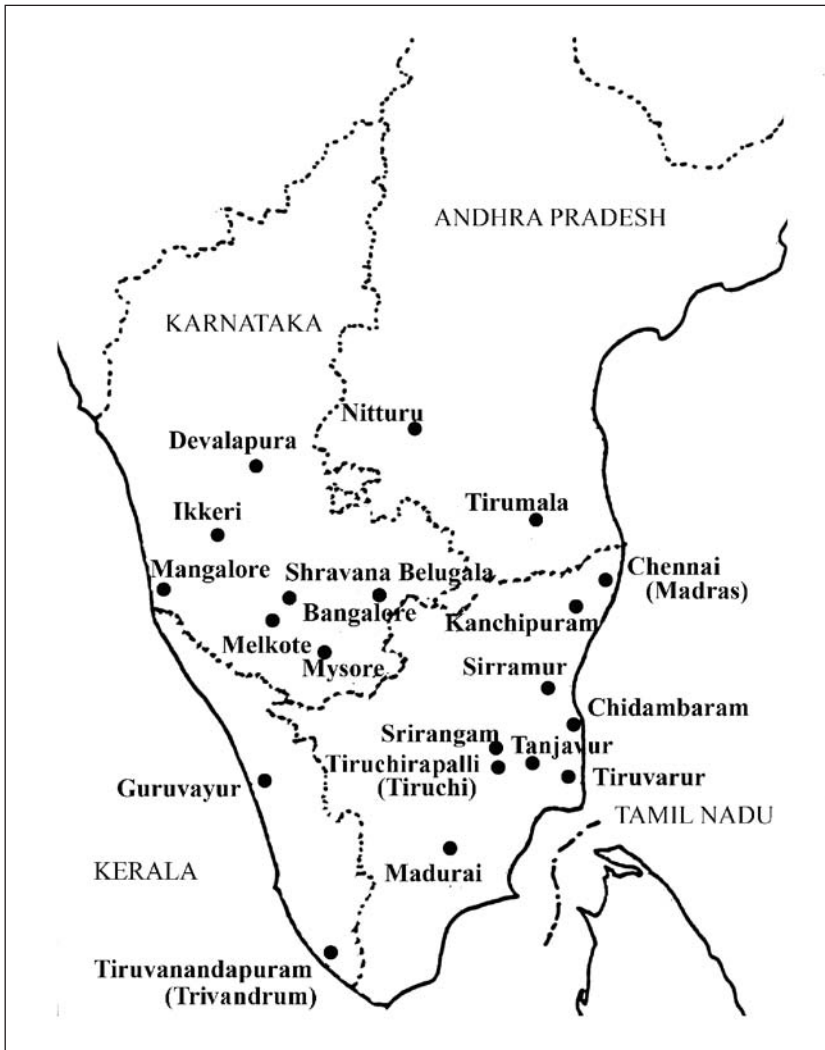


Figure 7. Map depicting locations of important temples.

In some Siva temples, different types of drums are used either augmenting the *periya mēlam* ensemble or replacing the *tavil*. In the area around Tiruvarur, a pair of kettledrums known as *koḍukottī* (or *kiḍikeṭṭī*) is sometimes used as a rhythmic accompaniment instrument replacing the *tavil*. It is played with a pair of two bamboo sticks with their playing ends shaped like a loop. The *koḍukottī* is mentioned in *tēvāram* hymns (sixth to ninth centuries) and Silappadiharam as a type of drum, though no morphological description is given (Dorai Rangaswamy 1958, 394–6). The name of the instrument may well derive from a Siva's dance with the same name (Pillay 1969, 462, 492; Peterson 1989, 99). The *koḍukottī* is still used at the Tyagarajasvami Temple in Tiruvarur during the procession of the deity on a temple car (*tēr uṣavam*) (Balasubramaniyan 1988, 265). Additionally, a pair of kettledrums known as *sammela*, which resembles the *koḍukottī*, is used in several temples in the Dakshin Kanara district of Karnataka state.

In some temples, the *periya mēlam* ensemble employs an additional drum which marks the different divisions of the *tālam* (rhythmic cycle), either augmenting or replacing the *tālam* (hand cymbals). At the Ekambaranada Temple in Kanchipuram (Chingleput district), a barrel-shaped drum called *ōḍal* is used in place of the *tālam*, whereas at the Krishna Temple in Guruvayur (Trichur district, Kerala), a kettledrum called *iruduri* is added to the ensemble during the daily *pūjā* to augment the rhythmic pattern played on the *tālam*.

Concluding Remarks

The religious and social importance of *periya mēlam* music in the past can be detected from the numerous references by Europeans, as well as from the stone inscriptions found in wide areas in South India. The temple rituals and festivals are considered the original context and *raison d'être* of *periya mēlam* music. *Rāgams* played on the *nāgasvaram* during daily temple rituals instilled and maintained a specific sense of correspondence between music and the passage of time among South Indian Hindus. The common statement such as “Even torch bearers could distinguish *rāgams* in the past” certainly contains a nostalgic exaggeration, but it is also true that their daily lives were marked, divided, and informed by tonal characteristics of each *rāgam*. The procession during temple festivals served as an open public concert linking the *rāgam*-based classical music and the general public who might not attend the closed concert-hall performances organized by elite music associations. During such processions, the improvisational aspect of music was pursued to the maximum, and a musician's skill was put to a rigorous test in a highly competitive atmosphere. Many great musicians in the past acquired their reputation and are still remembered by their performance in this context. The extended improvisation was a hallmark of *nāgasvaram* music, and an important stream that became part of the performance practice of contemporary Karnatak music.

In contrast to the glory attached to the temple performances in the past, the increasing indifference to temple affairs in the second half of the 20th century and the insufficient remuneration have threatened the foundation of the community of hereditary musicians. As old guards of the tradition slowly disappeared, young players began to deviate from the temple tradition. Today, many do not observe the system of *rāgam*-time correspondence and play *rāgams* that were in the past considered inappropriate to the ritual time. Some even play popular film songs at temple rituals and festivals.

The temple procession has become substantially shorter than before, depriving musicians of opportunities to indulge themselves in extended performance time and competitive atmosphere that maintained the musicianship of high caliber. The ritual repertoire of *periya mēlam* music played exclusively as part of temple procession has been incorporated into nonritual performance contexts. The first experimentation occurred in the 1970s when a popular violin player Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan recorded a *mallāri* with *tavil* accompaniment on one of his commercial cassette tapes. Although *periya mēlam* musicians of older generations criticized it as a deviation from the age-old tradition, several other instrumentalists of Karnatak music also included *mallāri* in their concert performance repertoire. Moreover, a well-known Bharata Natyam dancer V. P. Dananjayan used a *mallāri* for a dance piece and since then many dancers followed suit (also Pesch 1999, 179). Starting around 2000, it has even been played in “fusion” music where Indian and Western instruments are combined.⁵⁴

Older players and enthusiasts of *periya mēlam* music lament over the passing of the temple tradition, with which it has lost its areas of specialties such as exclusive ritual repertoire (*mallāri*, *rakti mēlam*, and other context-specific compositions) and extensive improvisation. While music scholars and journalists sometimes acknowledge the historical contribution of *periya mēlam* music, it is often done today from the viewpoint of Karnatak music that has presumably absorbed some features of *periya mēlam* music. And perhaps the decreasing importance given to temple music is an indication that the notion of auspiciousness associated with (or embodied in) the sound of *periya mēlam* music is also slowly disappearing in South India.⁵⁵

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Notes

¹ For other similar examples of European reactions to temple music in South India, see Loti (1907, 26) and “The Civilian” (1921, 53).

² There are two types of temples in South India: Brahmanical (Sanskritized) temples where all Indian gods such as Siva and Vishnu (and their countless manifestations) are enshrined, and more localized temples housing “village” or “folk” deities such as

Mariamman. The present article only discusses the musical tradition of the former. The *nāgasvaram* is also played in non-Brahmanical temples, but their performance tradition is separate from that for Brahmanical temples, and not within the scope of this study.

The data for the present article were gathered during my field research in South India since the mid-1980s. Although short trips were made to selected sites in the states of Kerala (Tiruvananthapuram, Trissur, and Guruvayur) and Karnataka (Bangalore, Mysore, Mangalore, and Melkote), the description below refers primarily to the situation in the state of Tamil Nadu, unless otherwise stated. In Tamil Nadu, more time was spent in the central districts (Tanjavur, Tiruchirapalli and southern part of Cuddalore), which are well-known for many large-scale temples and as the artistic center of *nāgasvaram* music. I visited temples and conducted interviews with musicians and patrons in Tanjavur (city), Tiruvaiyaru, Kumbakonam, Mayiladuthurai (Mayuram), Kilvelur, Chidambaram, Nagapattinam, Tiruvarur, Tiruchirapalli (Tiruchi), and Srirangam while the native places of musicians included, in addition to those mentioned, smaller towns and villages known for superb *periyā mēḷam* music such as Tiruvizhimizhalai, Tiruppamburam, Sirkazhi, Injikkudi, Sembonnarkoyil, Vaidesvarankoyil, and Tiruccerai. Outside of central Tamil Nadu, I also conducted research in Chennai (Madras), Kanchipuram, and Madurai. Tanjavur continues to assume the actual and symbolic importance: a majority of top-ranking *periyā mēḷam* musicians hail from the Tanjavur area as a style of playing identified with Tanjavur is considered most authentic and many musicians from other areas of Tamil Nadu and neighboring states continue to seek musical training in Tanjavur.

³ The drums known under various names such as *dholak* and *dhole* in North India come in enormous morphological variety. The only common feature is that they are all double-headed drums, like the *tavil* (Deva 1977, 40).

⁴ This evidence is quoted in Raghavan (1955) and Isaac (1964, 368).

⁵ The *tēr*, which is often translated as a temple car, is a chariotlike vehicle on which the image of the deity is placed during the procession.

⁶ However, Nijenhuis and Gupta report that a priest used to dance in front of the deity to the accompaniment of the *nāgasvaram* in some Siva temples (1987, 197).

⁷ The other two panels show a dwarf playing a snake charmer (single-reed aerophone) known today as *mahuḍi* or *puṅgi*, whereas the last panel depicts a musician blowing into a bent horn.

⁸ The *ottu* is a double-reed aerophone resembling the *nāgasvaram* that provides drone to the ensemble. It has been replaced by the *sruti peṭṭi* that consists of a rectangular wooden box (*peṭṭi*) in which free reeds are placed.

⁹ V. P. K. Sundaram (1985, 137) and Dick (1984), however, equate *vaṅgiyam* with *kuṭal* or *pullāṅkuṭal* (transverse flute).

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of literary and iconographical evidence concerning wind instruments in North India, see Flora (1983).

¹¹ The *pañcamuhavāṭṭiyam* has the large brass vessel as its body on top of which five tubular projections are attached. Each projection is covered with a skin. It is believed that Nandi (sacred bull) played this instrument when Siva danced (Das, 1964), and these five “faces” (*muham*) of the instrument correspond to the five “faces” or manifestations of Siva, after which they are named. They are tuned in five different pitches.

Six iconographical representations of this instrument are reported by Kuppuswamy and Hariharan (1985, 22, 23, 38, 41, 43, 60). In all examples, the instrument is depicted accompanying Nataraja's dance. In addition to these, Sambamurthy reports a bronze statue of Nataraja with a figure of a *pañjamuhavāṭṭiyam* player (Banugopan) at His right foot at the Sivalokanatha Temple in Tiruppungur (Sirkazhi taluk, Tanjavur district) (1982b, 214). The last player of *pañjamuhavāṭṭiyam*, Tiruvarur Sankaramurti (1912–1996), was attached to the Tyagarajasvami Temple in Tiruvarur. The term *pañjamuhavāṭṭiyam* is of recent origin, and the instrument is referred to with its Tamil name, *kuḍaviṛa* or *kuḍamuṛa* in inscriptions and *tēvāram* hymns by Saivite saints. See Rangacharya (1919/1985, 1434, Inscription #1549) and Peterson (1989, 139) for examples.

¹² The name Tyagaraja replaced its predecessor Vidivitanakan in Tamil or Aruradhipadi in Sanskrit during the 15th and 16th centuries (Ponnusamy 1972, 24). See Ponnusamy for the history of the Tyagarajasvami Temple (1972, 28–45). Tyagaraja, the best-known South Indian saint-composer, was named after this deity (Raghavan 1983, 36).

¹³ The badly damaged manuscript is in the possession of the family of T. S. Minakshisundaram Pillai (1916–1988) and his younger brother T. S. Latchappa Pillai (b. 1930).

¹⁴ Music was, and still is, believed to have power to induce rain. Many anecdotes relating to the miracle evocation of rain by means of music are found in the Mahabharata, *Puranams*, and *Jataka* stories. Some *paṇs* (melodic modes used in ancient South India) and *rāgams*, such as *Mēgaranjani* and *Amrita Varshini*, are also known to be particularly effective for this purpose. See Sambamurthy (1982c, 246–52) for some of such anecdotes. Rain-inducing *rāgas* have also been reported in Hindustani music (Neuman, 1980, 67).

¹⁵ Also see B. M. Sundaram (n.d.) and Krishnan and Latchappa Pillai (1988, 72). One of the two ivory *nāgasvarams* is displayed semipermanently at the Tamil Isai Sangam Library in the Raja Annamalai Hall in Chennai, whereas the other instrument is in the possession of T. S. Latchappa Pillai.

¹⁶ The association of *rāgams* with particular times of the day is already mentioned in works such as *Sangita Makaranda* by Narada (c. 12th century), in which a certain number of correlations with some of the presently used *rāgams* are found (Sambamurthy 1982c, 141–78). The tradition before Ramasami Diksitar's codification or what he based his system on is unknown. In addition, some *periya mēḷam* musicians assert that it was Ramasami Pillai, a *nāgasvaram* player, who codified the system.

¹⁷ Raghavan mentions the name of a *nāgasvaram* player who was presumably Muttusvami Diksitar's disciple (1975, 36), but his connection to contemporary musicians attached to Tyagarajasvami Temple is unknown.

¹⁸ Nijenhuis and Gupta report, more specifically, that a *nāgasvaram* musician from Tanjavur named Rudra Paspatis is said to have been responsible for the dissemination of some of Diksitar's compositions in Tanjavur during Diksitar's lifetime (1987, 102). Arunachalam, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of *nāgasvaram* players in Tiruppamburam in preserving Diksitar's compositions (1989, 134). While the geographical association of Rudra Paspatis is possibly Tiruppamburam, I could trace no musician by that name in the lineage of Tiruppamburam *nāgasvaram* musicians during Diksitar's lifetime.

¹⁹ According to B. M. Sundaram, Diksitar studied music with Kamalam, a *dēvadāsi*, and Chidambara Nattuvanar, an ancestor of the famed Tanjore Quartet (personal communication, 1989).

²⁰ Some of the other important rites of adoration include *abisēkam* (bathing), *naivēttiyam* (feeding), *alaṅkāram* (decoration), and *dipārāḍaṇai* (offering of light) (cf. Diehl 1956, 90).

²¹ The data given in this table are based on the information gathered from ten senior *nāgasvaram* musicians from the Tanjavur area in central Tamil Nadu. Some discrepancies can be observed among musicians and scholars as to the allocation of *rāgams* to ritual time.

²² The songs sung at *tiruppalliyaraiyeṟucci* are called *mēlukoluppu*. Kersenboom-Story provides the text of a *mēlukoluppu* she collected from P. Ranganayaki, former *dēvadāsi* from Tirutani in North Arcot district (1987, 153–4). S. Ramanathan provides the notation and the text of two *mēlukoluppus* composed by Tyagaraja (1984, 114–7).

²³ Rangaramanuja Ayyangar states that this system deteriorated in the second quarter of the century. He also relates his earliest personal experience of observing this system violated in 1919 (1972, xii–xiii).

²⁴ Kayarohanaswarar Nilayadakshi Temple in Nagapattinam is an example of this (Nagapattinam G. Venkatesan, the *dēvastāna vittuvāṇ* of the temple, personal communication 1987).

²⁵ The actual timing, name, and process of daily rituals differ in each temple. For the descriptions of daily rituals in particular individual temples, see Clothey (1983), Fuller (1984), and Loud (2004).

²⁶ The music recital held as part of festivals is called *kōyil kaccēri*, distinguished from *kalyāṇa kaccēri* at wedding receptions and *sabhā kaccēri* sponsored by cultural associations (*sabhā*). When famous *nāgasvaram* players are invited to a festival, it is not uncommon for the temple to sponsor a separate *kaccēri* as part of the cultural programs that include performances of classical music (both vocal and instrumental), dance, dance drama, and religious discourse. Sponsored as part of the festival, these *kōyil kaccēris* are open to the public and free of charge. They provide a venue to enjoy such performances for those who will shy away from elitist and heavily Brahman-oriented *sabhā kaccēris*.

²⁷ Rajarattinam Piḷḷai (1898–1956) was a charismatic musician who dominated the field of *nāgasvaram* music during the first half of the 20th century (Terada, 2000).

²⁸ The time of commencing the procession seems to vary from one temple to the next. See B. M. Sundaram (1986, 87) and Ramanathan (1986, 11) for variations.

²⁹ The first item performed by Bharata Natyam dancers is also known as *alārīppu*, but there seems no apparent relation between these two. See Higgins (1973, 53–72) for a description of the *alārīppu* in Bharata Natyam.

³⁰ Mānasollāsa, an encyclopedia compiled by the 12th-century western Chaulukya king, Somesvara, records that wrestling was an important form of entertainment in court life, along with music and dance. Kamat (1980, 68–72) also describes the popularity of wrestling in the social life of medieval Karnataka. In addition, a Portuguese trader, Domingo Paes, mentioned dancing women who wrestled in the court of Krishnadevaraya (Sewell 1900/1980, 268). Given the strong association of reed instruments with athletic activities

in various parts of the world (Bryant 1990, 154), Sankaran's theory deserves further investigation. Focusing on linguistic similarity, Jairazbhoy suggests the connection between *mallāri* and *Malhar rāg* in North Indian music (1980, 155). See Joseph Alter (1992) for a survey and assessment of literature on Indian wrestling.

³¹ Berberich states that *Ādi* (4+2+2), *Misra Chāpu* (3+2+2), *Sankīrṇa Jāti Tripuṭa* (9+2+2), *Chaturasra Jāti Aṭa* (4+4+2+2), and *Kaṇḍa Chāpu* (2+3) are the commonly employed *tālam*s for the *mallāri* (1974, 124).

³² Three speeds can be obtained by doubling and halving the original speed. The technique of rendering a composition in faster or slower speeds is most commonly known as *aṇulōma* ("with the current"; the composition is played twice as fast while the *tālam* is kept constant) and *pratilōma* ("against the current"; the composition is played twice as slow while the *tālam* is kept constant), respectively. However, some scholars define these two terms differently. Powers states that *pratilōma* also refers to the doubling of the tempo of the rhythmic cycle while a composition is rendered in the same speed, in addition to the meaning given above (1980, 110). Others maintain that *aṇulōma* refers to the rendering of a melody in different speeds, whether faster or slower, whereas *pratilōma* is the rhythmic cycle itself rendered in different speeds while the melody is played in the same tempo (Sambamurthy 1982a, 33; Shankar 1983, 190, 206).

³³ In fact, the type described here was called *periya mallāri*, to be distinguished from the other types of *mallāri* such as *taḷihai mallāri*, which was performed during the *naivēttiyam* ritual (feeding of the deity). Since the type played at the commencement of the procession is the only one practiced in most temples at present, it is simply called *mallāri* in this article.

³⁴ The *naḍai* is a subdivision of a beat into 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9 units. The *eḍuppu* is the starting point of the text in rhythmic cycle.

³⁵ For the connection of *pallavi* and *nāgasvaram* musicians, see Sangeeta Vimarsaka (1931), B. M. Sundaram (1977), and Kuppuswamy and Hariharan (1989, 9).

³⁶ Sankaran mentions elsewhere that *Nātakuraṇji* is the most suitable of all *rāgam*s for playing the *rakti mēḷam* (1976, 19). It is probable that the *rakti mēḷam* derived its name from *rakti rāgam*, which refers to a type of *rāgam* best suited for *rāgam* elaboration in slow tempo, such as those mentioned above for *rakti mēḷam*. In this case, the *rakti rāgam* is contrasted to *ghana* ("heavy") *rāgam*, those suitable for medium-tempo performance. However, the use of these two terms is not consistent. For example, the *ghana rāgam* is also considered ideal for extensive improvisation, and refers to the same *rāgam*s categorized under the *rakti rāgam* in the above definition (Sambamurthy, 1983, 16–7).

³⁷ Musicians in Tiruvarur claim that the *rakti mēḷam* originated in the Tyagarajasvami Temple, and that only from the time of Ramasami this genre became strongly associated with Sembonnarkoyil *nāgasvaram* musicians (B. M. Sundaram 1992, 75).

³⁸ One example of this is Parimala Ranganatha Temple in Tiruvirandur (Mayuram taluk, Tanjavur district) (Radhakrishna Pillai 1985).

³⁹ *Padam* is a short composition derived from the repertoire of music accompanying dance and characterized by romantic and devotional texts. *Jāvaḷi* is another form of short composition derived from dance repertoire, often with a textual theme of passionate or erotic love. *Tiruppugaḷ* refer to compositions by Arunagirinada (15th century) characterized by the use of many unusual *tālam*s.

⁴⁰ The custom of providing these privileges to temple musicians and dancers was recorded in a number of inscriptions from the Chola period onwards. See Hultzsch, vol. 2/2 (1983–1984, 259–303) for example.

⁴¹ A similar arrangement for temple priests (*gurukkaḷ*) is reported by Singer (1972, 111–2).

⁴² As early as 1961, a well-known *nāgasvaram* musician, Tiruvidaimarudur Virusvami Piḷḷai (1901–1973) made such a public plea as part of his presidential address at the annual Music Academy conference (Veeruswami Piḷḷai 1962, 15). The Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Tamil Nadu, also recommended that the minimum monthly remuneration be fixed at Rs. 200 per person (Government of Tamil Nadu 1975, 2:24).

⁴³ See Oddie (1984) and Nambi Arooran (1984) for the relationship between the *āḍiṇam* and *madam*.

⁴⁴ The other two are located in Darumapuram (Mayuram taluk) and Tiruppanandal (Kumbakonam taluk). See Nilakanta Sastri (1963, 116–9) for a general description of the *āḍiṇam*, and Nambi Arooran (1981) for the origin of these three *āḍiṇams*.

⁴⁵ Kandasāmi Piḷḷai was the *āḍiṇa vittuvāṇ* at Tiruvavadudurai Adinam from 1971 until his death in 1988. The *kalam* is a measure of capacity for grains: 1 *kalam* is the equivalent of 96 liters.

⁴⁶ Rajarattinam Piḷḷai's association with the Tiruvavadudurai Adinam for more than 30 years was initiated by his own relatives. First, Tirumarugal Natesa Piḷḷai, who adopted Rajarattinam Piḷḷai, was a famous *nāgasvaram* musician attached to the *Adinam*. Although Natesa Piḷḷai died when Rajarattinam Piḷḷai was still a small child, he had an advantage of being an adopted son of the previous *āḍiṇa vittuvāṇ*. Second, the patron-husband of Rajarattinam Piḷḷai's sister, who was a trustee at the *āḍiṇam*, not only gave encouragement to Rajarattinam Piḷḷai but arranged well-known musicians to teach him. In this environment, Rajarattinam Piḷḷai had a chance at a very early age to perform for the head of the *āḍiṇam*, who encouraged him in his studies. After Rajarattinam Piḷḷai's talent was detected, his musical training and development were carefully monitored by the *āḍiṇam* itself through these two enthusiastic and influential supporters.

⁴⁷ Rajarattinam Piḷḷai was the only musician presented with a gold-covered *nāgasvaram* by the Tiruvavadudurai Adinam, whereas three other eminent *nāgasvaram* musicians were given a silver-covered *nāgasvaram* (Malarvizhi n.d., 28–9).

⁴⁸ The Saivite saints whose hymns are sung at the temples by the *ōḍuvār* are known as *nāyaṇmār* (sing. *nāyaṇār*). The hymns of these most prominent *nāyaṇmār* are collectively called *tēvāram*, and they constitute the important vocal musical tradition in Siva temples. See Peterson (1980) for a discussion on the significance of pilgrimage on *tēvāram* songs of Tamil saints. Vaisnava poet-saints (*āṇvārs*) composed hymns known as *prabandam*.

⁴⁹ It is believed that when Diksitar composed and sang this *kīrttaṇai*, the closed temple door swung open and he had *darsan* (a glimpse) of the deity (Venkatarama Aiyar 1968, 40; Sambamurthy 1985, 132–3).

⁵⁰ Ganesan was the *dēvastāna vittuvāṇ* of the Akshayalingaswamy Temple at the time of the interview. This composition, however, may be sung at concert hall recitals.

⁵¹ All the other instruments played in this temple are kept in the same room, and similarly are not to be taken outside of the temple.

⁵² While a stone *nāgasvaram* is believed to have been played in several other temples as well, it is found only in Kumbesvarasvami Temple (Raghavan 1978). The origin and mythical explanation of this instrument is not known.

⁵³ The last player on *muhavīnai*, Kudavasal Govindaraj, was replaced by his brother Ramamurtti who played the regular *2-kaṭṭai nāgasvaram*.

⁵⁴ To my knowledge, however, no *mallāri* has ever been played in ritual context of temple procession on any solo instruments other than the *nāgasvaram*.

⁵⁵ It could be argued, however, that the temple music tradition is not simply being attenuated but instead slowly transformed into the one based on mediated music. For example, Paul Greene reports that cassette tapes are partly replacing live music at temple rituals and festivals in villages of Tamil Nadu (1995). I have also observed that recorded devotional music was frequently played at temple festivals in the Tanjavur area and Chennai, often side by side with live *periya mēlam* musicians.

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